3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

nigger been press close to me. I say: "Dats de bery man steal my money." I'quire roun de station and find out who he is. Dey say he uh man from John Island and dey call 'e name to me.

No, I ain't make no 'temp to call de police. Dat man done spend de money anyhow. I jest say: "All right. I goin' to leave yuh wid God."

When I git home, I shet my door and put de whole ting 'fore God. I tell um my trouble and what dat man done 'gainst me. In two week time dat man jest as stiff and cold as uh piece ob iron.[28]

This may be similar to the power of *nkisi*, essentially a positive force working for the good, to ward off *kindoki*, and thus doing an evil deed. Generally speaking, however, the deity represented forces of good. Gullahs believed in the power of God and saw that power as a form of protection. This may perhaps explain why interviewers for the Federal Writers Project observed that nearly all the doors and windows of Gullah cabins were painted blue, the color of the heavens. One theory was that the custom of painting doors and windows blue was an unconscious holdover from the early days of slavery in the Sea Islands when Gullahs were given the residue from indigo vats to use on the doors and windows of their cabins. However this does not explain the fact that Gullah conjurers concocted pills for their "patients" the color of which was usually blue also. Perhaps then, the shade blue was effective in keeping out "speerits." Spirits were said to be afraid of blue because it reminded them of heaven, hence evil beings could not stand the sight of blue. But the Gullahs themselves would not verify either notion regarding their preference for blue. If asked why they painted their doors and windows blue, Gullahs would smile wryly and say some people "jest lak dat color."[29]

Thus, while Gullahs turned gratefully to the Christian God, whom they regarded as a warm, personal friend, this did not prevent them from retaining some of their ingrained customs and beliefs, as is observed in their attitudes toward life, death and the supernatural. And, even in the Gullahs' approach toward death, a sense of community prevailed. The ritual was observed with respect and responsibility. There was a feeling of satisfaction that, while the individual had to cross the river alone, the right impetus had been given before the deceased left the earth, and thus the living had done their part by fulfilling their collective obligation for the last time.

A direct relationship appears to exist between the African and Gullah theory of being. In both, God (Jesus for the Gullahs) was the apex,

9: Parrish B-4,5 (ca.1916-1941) 1942
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
Georgia
St. Simon's Island

had slaves of "Moorish or Arabian descent, devout Mussulmans, who prayed to Allah . . . morning, noon, and evening." Wylly adds in a footnote that three times each day Bilali faced East and called upon Allah.[21] When he died his Koran and praying sheepskin were buried with him.

Other details concerning Bilali are given by Georgia Bryan Conrad in her "Reminiscences" which appeared in the *Southern Workman* in 1901. She tells us that "On Sapelo Island, near Darien, I used to know a family of Negroes who worshipped Mahomet. They were all tall and well-formed, with good features. They conversed with us in English, but in talking among themselves they used a foreign tongue that no one else understood. The head of the tribe was a very old man called Bi-la-li. He always wore a cap that resembled a Turkish fez. These Negroes held themselves aloof from the others as if they were conscious of their own superiority." [22]

Bilali's descendants on Sapelo have given me much interesting data on old notions which probably came out of Africa. To avoid collusion I never question two Negroes together, and always check the material given by one with that from others. Several Sapelo Negroes have told me that red was such a popular color with the Africans that many were captured by slave-ship captains hanging red cloth on the deck of a ship. When the Negroes unsuspectingly came aboard, they took a long

[21] *Thomas Astley in Vol. II, of his Collection of Voyages and Travels, 1745, gives extracts from the writings of various African explorers. Their observations on the Mohammedans of the Senegal and Gambia region throw some light on the religious customs of the Mohammedans on Sapelo. One said: "the natives along the Gambia worship the one true and only God, whom they call Allah." Another remarked that "Mohammedanism found among their people is very lame. . . . It consists in . . . two or three ceremonies as the Ramadhin, or Lent, The Bayram, or Easter, and the practice of circumcision." Francis Moor made explorations in the same section in 1730 and Astley quotes him as saying: "they [the Fuli] are much like the Arabs, whose language is taught in their schools . . . they are generally more skilled in the Arabic than the Europeans in the Latin; for most of them speak it, though they have a vulgar tongue of their own, called Fuli. . . . Their humanity extends to all, but they are doubly kind to their own race . . . support the old, the blind and the lame. . . . They are rarely angry and the author could never hear them abuse one another. . . . They are always very clean. . . . They are strict Mohammedans and only a few drink brandy." Another explorer specified the time at which the Mohammedan Negroes said their prayers: "at Day-break, Noon, and at Sun-set." Sieur Brüe reported that "they keep standing a considerable time, looking . . . towards the Sun-rising; then they advance two paces, muttering something between their teeth: Then they lie flat on their faces: next rising on their knees . . . and afterwards they kiss the earth, several times."*

[22] *It is estimated that Mrs. Conrad saw the Sapelo Bilali shortly before 1860.*

9: Parrish B-4,5 (ca.1916-1941) 1942
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
Georgia
St. Simon's Island

voyage from which they never returned.[23] Ten years ago Katie told me that the Sapelo Negroes never swept dirt out the door at night if they could help it. If they did or were obliged to throw out water, it was important to say, "Move on, fr'en," or " 'Scuse me, brother." Otherwise they were in danger of offending some of their kinfolk who might be passing by or "visitin' aroun'." On St. Simon's I was told if it were necessary to sweep at night you must first throw out a live coal, to make sure you did not sweep away the spirit of some member of the family.

On Sapelo if a hag torments you at night you put a knife, or a Bible, under your pillow. Glasgow says that a man he knows would cry out in his sleep and could get no peace until he tried this remedy.[24] Katie told me that when you had occasion to speak of the dead, you made the sign of the cross on your forehead. At a funeral on St. Simon's an old woman went to the fireplace and, with a sooty finger, made the same sign on the forehead of a little child. The next day, when asked why she did this, she explained that it was to keep the spirit of the dead man from troubling the youngster.[25] Katie also told me that passing the child over the coffin to someone on the other side afforded the same immunity.

I have never been convinced that the reason given by our Negroes for holding funerals at night was unimpeachably true. The answer I usually get, when I question them, reflects on the generosity of the slave owner. It seems unlikely that any master as kindhearted as the one described by Susan Dabney Smedes, in *A Southern Planter*, would begrudge the time it took from the daily "tas' " for the funeral of a beloved slave. Night funerals were apparently an established custom in Virginia in 1835, the time the Dabneys left for Mississippi. Mrs. Smedes tells us that she remembers the death of Grannie Harriett, born in tide-water Virginia long before

[23] *M. Andanson is quoted in Astley's Collection as saying that the "Bristol and Liverpool ships were the worst offenders." It is also reported by Miss Kingsley, in West African Travels, that red was a favorite color of the spirits ("spirits always like red") and the most frequent charm-case was of that color "to flatter and please" them.*

[24] *Miss Beckwith mentions the same inclination to ascribe supernatural powers to objects used in Christian religion; "hence a [Revivalist] preacher always held a Bible, although he might hold it upside down." On the coast of Georgia this custom is the rule, but it is from an unwillingness to admit illiteracy and to depart from a convention. But Miss Beckwith tells of other superstitions that are surprisingly similar to those found on our sea islands. They were in all likelihood carried to Jamaica by the slaves of the loyalists who settled there following the Revolutionary War.*

[25] *A curious instance of Catholic influence on an African superstition. Lampblack was used to darken coffins in the old days, and a finger rubbed on the coffin was as effective as one dabbed in soot.*